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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000543

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SUBJECT: MUTED ENTHUSIASM, TROUBLE-FREE PROCESS, MARK
CAMPAIGN FOR MAY PARLIAMENTARY RERUNS SO FAR

Classified By: DCM JASON P. HYLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In marked contrast to six months ago, the run-up to Azerbaijan's ten May 13 rerun parliamentary elections has been relatively quiet. Three weeks into the campaign and the GOAJ and the 200 candidates appear to be quietly preparing for election day by training election commissions, preparing finger ink, and strategizing about fuller campaigns to be launched in mid-April. Independent NGOs are gearing up to observe the elections, although the USG-supported Election Monitoring Commission has not yet been registered by the MOJ. Without the participation of high-profile national leaders, the races are taking on a more local flavor, an important step toward representative democracy. With 100-150 candidates likely to remain on election day, the May reruns present the perfect opportunity for the GOAJ to demonstrate its commitment to clean elections and for candidates to run local, issue-driven campaigns. We will continue our high-level engagement with the GOAJ to push for a very credible election in May and are looking forward to a positive result.
END SUMMARY.

PLETHORA OF CANDIDATES, AGAIN

¶2. (SBU) The newly reconstituted opposition bloc Azadliq (without former member Musavat Party but with one wing of the Azerbaijan National Independence Party (ANIP) and opposition leader Lala Shovket) may have chosen to boycott the reruns, but that has not stopped interest from almost 200 candidates to register for the 10 seats. Domestic observer organizations have all reported that registration went smoothly, despite the fact that 22 candidates were denied registration. (From reports, it appears that election commissions rejected candidates whose documents were incomplete or falsified, as opposed to last year when virtually every candidate was registered.) As of early April, however, it appeared that the candidate pool was down to 153 (25 of whom are women) as parties close ranks around official candidates. There are currently more than one hundred candidates running as independents. According to ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party officials, the party is running six candidates, all from the official list. (The total number of YAP candidates has dropped dramatically the past several weeks as the party has enforced discipline over its members). There are currently 11 Musavat candidates running, but only seven of these are official candidates; two candidates running against official candidates have been expelled from the party. Additionally, there are six candidates from Etibar Mammedov's wing of ANIP and various candidates running from smaller political parties.

13. (SBU) To date we are aware of no incidents in which independent candidates have been forced to withdraw. (This was a significant issue during the last few weeks of the November election as more than 500 candidates withdrew in the remaining days of the campaign). We will continue to press the GOAJ to ensure that all candidates who wish to run are allowed to run full campaigns; however, given an average of 15 candidates per district (at one point one ConEc had 39), we expect to see a degree of natural attrition as the campaign progresses in earnest later this month.

14. (SBU) Missing from the dynamic this time around are the big political players who by definition draw interest into a campaign. From Musavat, the only political notable running is Arif Hajili, one of the seven opposition leaders convicted (and later pardoned) of organizing the 2003 post-election demonstrations. Ilyas Ismayilov, the chairman of Adalat (Justice) Party is running again for a western Azerbaijan seat. Otherwise, no national politicians have chosen to bid for a seat.

15. (SBU) In spite of the lack of big-name candidates, the more local nature of the campaign could in fact create more dynamic and relevant races that focus more on constituents' concerns and less on the national sound bites of the major parties. Through USAID funding, IRI has already trained 50 independent and party candidates and 100 candidates' representatives; NDI is also working on training party candidates. This indicates an interest in learning how to run a constructive campaign, although both NDI and IRI assess that only some of their trainees are serious. Last year's campaign saw energetic efforts to win over voters in some races, particularly in the regions. Given the heightened localization of the reruns, we expect this phenomenon to increase and will watch the campaigns closely.

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ELECTION PROCEDURES MOSTLY ON TRACK

16. (SBU) Two innovations from November -- exit polling and finger inking -- have become part of the permanent political landscape. IRI will conduct exit polling in all ten constituencies. Its staff currently is setting the groundwork by recruiting pollsters and putting logistics in order; they expect to begin the public rollout shortly. The GOAJ has welcomed this step by the USG and we expect the project will proceed even more smoothly than in November. The GOAJ has also begun working with IFES to take necessary steps for procuring inking supplies and checking all administrative boxes. We have heard some reports that voter lists were either posted late or not at all (the deadline for posting the lists was March 9). Checks of precincts in Baku indicated voter lists were posted; however, we will watch this issue carefully and have already asked the CEC to investigate the situation.

17. (SBU) The USG along with the international community also welcomed the GOAJ's lifting of the ban on foreign-funded NGOs to observe the elections as an organization, rather than individually. However, the Election Monitoring Center, which receives funding and assistance from NDI, is still waiting for its government registration as an NGO from the Ministry of Justice. Given this, EMC has decided not to pursue observer registration as an organization with the CEC and instead will register all of its observers as individuals, following past practices. The other main observation group, Arzu Abdullayeva's Election Coordinating Advisory Council (ECAC) plans to launch and register a robust observer mission as an organization. The CEC has already guaranteed us organizations and individuals will have no problems registering to observe on May 13. EMC reported that their long-term observers just this week received accreditation, after having submitted the paperwork more than one month ago. We will continue to watch this issue closely and ask the

GOAJ to adjudicate its decisions expeditiously and fairly.
(Based on recent history, we have no reason to expect that
the CEC delayed the registrations for political reasons).

MUTED CAMPAIGN SEASON BEGINS

¶18. (SBU) Despite the high number of candidates and the steps the GOAJ has taken to prepare for the May reruns, the campaign scene has been fairly quiet. Musavat has begun its door-to-door campaigns, but has told us it will launch a more robust campaign effort in mid-April. Musavat has held a few courtyard meetings with voters throughout the country, as have some independents, all of which have been conducted without incident. Parties have not requested permission for mass demonstrations, although the Azadliq Bloc (boycotting the elections) has said it will request permission in April or May. Posters are beginning to go up in the regions as the numerous first-time candidates seek name recognition. EmbOff visited one of the Baku ConEcs and reported that only four candidates had posters displayed; most of them for the YAP candidate. Voters with whom he spoke knew the four candidates who had put up posters but did not appear familiar with any of the other candidates.

¶19. (SBU) Despite the slow start, we expect that momentum will pick up somewhat as election day draws nearer, but we do not expect the frenzy we witnessed last year. Many parties and individual candidates zeroed out their campaign coffers with an all-out effort in November. Therefore, parties and candidates have told us they are reserving cash-intensive projects for closer to election day to get the most for their money. This also has the added benefit of preserving candidates' and voters' stamina, as some constituents seem to have election fatigue from last year.

INTERFERENCE LOW TO DATE

¶110. (C) Perhaps the most positive development is that interference on the part of the authorities appears to be low to date. While domestic observer organizations have reported isolated, small incidents, these appear to stem from YAP efforts to rally around the official candidate or candidates promising graft if elected. The only murmuring of local government pressure or use of administrative resources to date has come from Jalilabad, one of the notorious regions from the November election. Reports indicate that the ExCom is asking other government officials to vote for one of the

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independent candidates. Also of note is that the YAP candidate originally declared the winner in a race later overturned by the CEC (likely because of the clear USG-funded exit poll results) is running in a neighboring district governed by the same ExCom. While we have not heard widespread reports about the candidate receiving administrative resources this time around, we will follow this race closely. Should instances of official influence become more widespread as the campaign begins in earnest, we will engage immediately with GOAJ and CEC officials to ensure that such incidents are stopped and those responsible are punished.

COMMENT

¶111. (C) May's ten parliamentary reruns provide an opportunity for the GOAJ to run very credible elections. With little threat from national opposition leaders and the chance for true independents to win seats, the GOAJ faces a win-win situation by allowing these races to go forward from beginning to end, unhindered. We will continue to deliver that message to the GOAJ at all levels and are looking forward to positive results.

HARNISH